

**Men and Ideas:  
The Philosophy of M.N. Roy**

**A.B. Shah**

This article seeks to examine the philosophical foundations of new humanism formulated by Manabendranath Roy, primarily in his famous twenty-two Theses 1946-48<sup>1</sup> and, secondarily, in *Reason, Romanticism and Revolution*<sup>2</sup>. I do not consider here Roy's philosophical writings of his earlier Marxist phase, though one can easily trace through them a certain continuity of approach and value-commitment that ultimately were to culminate in the philosophy of new humanism. This continuity distinguishes Roy from most other erstwhile Marxist thinkers. It lends unity and an underlying direction to his peregrinations from orthodox nationalism through Marxism to new humanism. To me this seems important in any evaluation of Roy's philosophical thought in its final form. For, philosophy were to be understood not merely as a technical investigation into the foundations of systematic thought but as a forader Socratic concern with the discovery of wisdom and, further, if wisdom means knowledge applied to the problems of men (John Dewey), then an understanding of the method and motivation of a philosopher is indispensable for a proper assessment of his philosophy. This is likely to be over looked by men whose interests are confined to technical philosophy. They are apt to forget that the beginnings of both logic and analytical philosophy were made by one who chose the hemlock rather than an easy escape from prison. This is not to suggest that in an appraisal of Roy's philosophy one should overlook or show any special consideration for his weaknesses of formulation. On the contrary, precisely because philosophy was for Roy intimately connected with the theory of nature, on the one hand, and the theory of social action, on the other, it is all the more necessary to subject it to a rigorous scrutiny from two different points of view. One must examine it from the standpoint of science in order to decide whether its assertions are compatible with the findings of natural and social sciences. But this is not enough. In view of the implications for social change that Roy draws from his philosophy, it is also necessary to examine it from the social but, strictly speaking, non-philosophical viewpoint. Such an approach would make intelligible certain propositions by providing to them the context in which they were asserted. It would also be useful to keep in mind the audience that Roy had in mind. This audience was made up of two disparate groups—one consisting of Marxists and Indian nationalists, on the one hand, and the other consisting of the idealist thinkers of the contemporary world. Also, like Marx, Roy looked to philosophy not only for an interpretation of the world but for a method of changing it too. Indeed, Roy went beyond Marx by recognizing that once generated, ideas have a logic and momentum of their own. Hence contrary to Marxism, thought, for Roy, is the most revolutionary commodity produced by man, not just the leisurely output of cloistered scholarship. He was therefore more interested in rebutting the main positions of others than in formulating his own philosophy with the precision and detail characteristic of a professional philosopher. He does give a system and would, in that sense, perhaps be the last of the system-builders in the grand tradition of Plato, Hegel and Marx. However, as with his predecessors, Roy's formulations too are some

times imprecise and seem to convey something altogether different from what, in the context of his non - philosophical preoccupations, he is known to have had in mind. The critic's task is not very easy in such a situation. It is all the more difficult when the thinker in question is also a prolific writer<sup>3</sup>. In the case of Roy both these facts have to be taken into account.

## II

The main principles of new humanism may be stated as follows, mostly in Roy's own words<sup>4</sup>.

(1) Rising out of the background of a law-governed universe, the human being is essentially rational, Reason in man is an echo of the harmony in the universe and, being a biological property, is not antithetical to will. Historical determinism therefore does not exclude freedom of the will.

(2) Rationality implies morality, for morality is an appeal to conscience and conscience is the instinctive awareness of, and reaction to, the environment. It is a mechanistic biological function on the level of consciousness. Therefore it is rational.

3. Ideation is a physiological process resulting from the awareness of the environment but ideas, once formed, have a logic and a momentum of their own. Cultural patterns and ethical values are not mere ideological superstructures of established economic relations.
4. Quest for freedom and search for truth constitute the basic urge of human progress. The quest for freedom is a continuation on a higher level-of intelligence and emotion-of the biological struggle for existence. The search for truth is a corollary thereof.
5. Truth is correspondence with objective reality. Scientific knowledge does give us at least an approximate picture of what we are studying. Therefore, truth can be described as the content of knowledge.
6. Knowledge is always acquaintance with reality. Truth being correspondence with reality, the content of knowledge is truth.
7. Thus freedom, knowledge and truth can be woven harmoniously in the texture of one philosophy explaining all the aspects of existence-material, mental and moral. Such an all-embracing philosophy eliminates dualism, reconciles idealism with materialism, and accommodates ethics with naturalism.

The implications or correlates of these principles for social philosophy are important and may be stated as follows, once again, mostly in Roy's own words.

8. The individual is prior to society and the state. Coming out of the background of biological evolution, the human species starts its struggle as individuals. In the course of time, the isolated individuals realize that together, they could carry on the struggle more successfully. That was the origin of society.

9. The purpose of all rational human endeavour, individual as well as collective, is attainment of freedom in ever-increasing measure. Freedom is progressive disappearance of all restrictions.
10. Man is the maker of his world-man as a thinking being, and he can be only so as an individual. Revolutions are heralded by iconoclastic ideas conceived by gifted individuals.
11. In the last analysis, education of the citizen is a precondition for a successful reorganization of society so as to ensure common progress and prosperity without encroaching on the freedom of the individual.

Roy's theory of organized democracy and decentralized planning, with emphasis on co-operatives rather than on state ownership of the means of production, followed from these principles, but it will be examined in a subsequent article.

### III

Before commenting on statements (1) to (7) in the preceding section it would be useful to bring out the main assumptions underlying them. These assumptions may be briefly stated as follows.

*Assumption 1.* It is necessary to have a theory of nature as the basis of a theory of man, for in the absence of such a basis there can be no rational sanction for ethics.

In other words, there can be no valid social philosophy that is not deducible from a philosophy of science.

Assumption 1 in its turn implies another assumption, which is already contained in (7) above :

*Assumption 2.* It is possible to unify all knowledge into a single universal system reared on a few fundamental principles, which themselves are suggested and validated by empirical observation.

A third assumption, more specific in nature, is equally important not only for new humanism but for all who set out to bring a total reconstruction of mankind.

*Assumption 3.* Determinism in natural science, particularly in physics, is indispensable for ensuring the validity of a theory of social change.

It seems to me that the present development of human knowledge and the most likely direction of its further growth rule out these assumptions. It can also be shown that none of them is necessary for constructing a social philosophy embodying the values that new humanism stands for (See Appendix to this article).

### IV

We may now take up the individual statements of Sections II. Roy rejected the transcendentalism of the idealists as well as the crude materialism of the Marxists. He was therefore concerned with showing that while ideas, including ethical values, had their origin in physical reality as perceived by the human brain they were not, as Lenin asserted, mere reflections of it in the human sensorium. Thus, on the one hand, Roy asserted that neither reason nor the moral impulse was a sign of 'the divine spark' in man, nor did they point to the existence of a vital principle like *sole* or *entelechy* inhering in the human body. On the other hand mental phenomena were not mere states of consciousness like a cinematographic film without any power to affect the physical process they were supposed to originate in. On the contrary, there was a constant interaction between ideas and events and neither could claim priority in causal potency over the other.

Granting this, some of the formulations given by Roy still sound unsatisfactory. For instance, take statement (1) regarding human rationality. One may easily concede that reason in man is a biological property and therefore is not antithetical to will. However, it is not obvious that man is *essentially* rational merely because he rises out of the background of a law-governed physical universe. Indeed, there are a number of difficulties here. First, the statement assumes that the physical universe itself is law-governed, which implies unrestricted predictability backward and forward in time. Moreover, even if we take 'law-governed' only to mean that every event can be explained in terms of an antecedent cause and specific laws, other problems still remain. For instance, 'rational' as applied to the human being means 'endowed with, and capable of using, the ability to learn from experience, to relate means to ends, to think in terms of cause and effect or premise and conclusion; in short, capable of reflective thinking'. As applied to nature, 'rational' would mean 'comprehensible to human reason, obeying laws which permit systematic description including the prediction of future events from a study of the present or the past'. Let us denote these meanings of 'rational' by the symbols  $R(h)$  and  $R(n)$ . Then the thesis in question asserts that  $R(n)$  implies  $R(h)$ . Now the utmost that can be asserted is that since nature has the property  $R(n)$  and man rises out of the background of nature, he too has the property  $R(n)$ . The presence of  $R(h)$  in man has to be separately proved or postulated and does not affect the presence of  $R(n)$  in him.

However, the rationality of man as agent,  $R(h)$ , may be deduced from his rationality as object,  $R(n)$ , by arguing that man as agent is also a possible object (of study by other men) and hence his thinking, which is an aspect of his being human, must also be rational. But another difficulty must then be faced. If the presence of  $R(n)$  implies that of  $R(h)$  in man, other living beings too must be credited with the power of rational thinking in the sense of  $R(h)$ . One may overcome this difficulty by saying that  $R(h)$  is *essentially*, that is, latently present in  $R(n)$  and that it is only a difference of degree between man and other beings in so far as their rationality as agent is concerned. Such a reply would, however, prove too much. It would raise the basic question, 'is there anything that may be identified as the essence of man, or of the amoeba, or of all living beings?', and would rule out the emergence of new qualities.

Indeed, there is a more fundamental difficulty involved here. Man's rationality as object, R (n), is conceded above on the strength of nature's having the same property. Since man differs from nature in most other respects, how do we justify the assumption underlying this concession : namely, that if B evolves from A, it must necessarily inherit a certain property of A? Roy's thesis really asserts that the laws of life are implicit in those of nature. This is only true in the limited sense that there is no transcendental source from which these laws have to be derived. It is not true in the wider sense, which Roy did not have in mind, that given the laws of nature, one can foresee how life would behave. For at every turn of evolution certain new properties emerge which cannot be predicted on the basis of the earlier state alone.

Roy's attempt to derive the moral impulse from reason suffers from equally serious weaknesses. To assert that conscience is a mechanistic biological function, even if on the level of consciousness, means that basically conscience is the same at all stages of conscious life, especially in all members of a species that has reached a given level of consciousness. This should be so because the instinctive make-up, including the pattern of responses to given stimuli, and the other mechanistic biological functions are the same in the members of a given species. According to the thesis in question, it would therefore follow that all human beings, regardless of the stage of their cultural development - primitive, ancient, medieval, modern, in the East or the West-share the same conception of morality. As a matter of fact, this is not true.

Secondly, even granting the first part of the thesis, so that conscience is characterized as a mechanistic, biological function at the level of consciousness, it still does not follow that morality is rational. Nor does it follow that being rational in the sense of R (h) implies being moral. That morality is comprehensible to reason is obvious, and so also the fact that reason is an invaluable aid in the pursuit of moral as of any other values. What is questioned is the particular, premises, conclusion, relationship that the thesis asserts between morality and rationality. Roy contends that 'values are facts', hoping thereby to explain the universality of certain fundamental ethical values and also, perhaps, their compulsive character. But in so doing he overlooks the logical gulf that separates the 'ought' from the 'is'.

The confusion becomes intelligible if one notes that Roy was looking to science, as opposed to transcendentalism and historicism, for providing a sanction for moral values. His adversaries were not those who had assimilated the spirit of science but the Marxists, for whom ethics like art was an element of the cultural superstructure, and the idealists for whom the moral impulse was a sign of the divine in man. For both these groups, the source of values lay outside the individual, who therefore was by himself no more than a plaything of history or a clod of earth like other animal if not a vessel of sin. As in the case of human rationality, here too Roy sought to prove more than was necessary.

I would briefly touch upon Roy's conceptions of truth and knowledge. He describes truth as acquaintance with reality and therefore the content of knowledge. This would sound rather naïve unless one also remembered that Roy is here contrasting the notion of

scientific truth with that of revealed or metaphysical truth. For him, science alone can provide an understanding of reality that is capable of public verification, so that all talk of truth that is either subjective or otherwise non-empirical is merely so much verbiage. While agreeing with Roy on the commonsense level, one would still feel that his formulation could have been more precise. For instance, truth can best be defined as a property of propositions, a proposition being true if there is a fact which verifies its assertion or if it can be deduced from propositions that are so verifiable. Knowledge would then be the content of true propositions that are so verifiable. Knowledge would then be the content of true propositions *known as true*.

Truth is thus a wider conception than knowledge. On what may be called the realist view of truth, 'there are facts and there are sentences related to these facts in ways which make the sentences true or false, quite independently of any way of deciding the alternative'<sup>5</sup>. In other words, it is possible to conceive of a proposition which is true but which no human being has yet known to be true. In what sense then is the truth of such a proposition the content of knowledge?

## V

My own feeling, based on personal experience, is that Roy would have welcomed criticism of this type and would have willingly modified his philosophical formulations in most respects, if not all. He fought for his ideas with vigour but had no vested interest in them, so that even when he was defending his most cherished theories he always had an open mind. His primary commitment was not to a specific interpretation of science but to science as method and as a liberal value. Also, he was in the grand tradition of philosophy from Socrates to Dewey and Cassirer, for whom philosophy was an immensely practical pursuit. That is why, disillusioned with earlier systems of philosophy, he became another, perhaps reluctant, system-builder himself. Had he grown up in a more liberal and critical intellectual climate than that of the Bengal of the early years of this century and later of Mexico and communist Russia, he would perhaps have developed a different, more modern and more rigorous, philosophy of nature and a more scientific theory of social change. As it happened, he only cleared the ground for someone else to cultivate. That by no means detracts from the importance of his accomplishment in the prevalent climate of Indian philosophy.

The appendix which follows contains a set of formulations referred to at the end of Section III. They embody the values of new humanism and are at the same time in conformity with the findings of modern science as I understand the latter. The purpose is not to supplant what Roy formulated but to demonstrate that what is really valuable in his philosophy can be reconciled with modern science, on which he set great store. That is the only reason for giving the alternative formulations in the same form in which Roy gave his own.

## Appendix

1. Rising out of the background of a physical nature which in its essential aspects is known to be law-governed, the phenomenon of man is capable of rational explanation. His distinctively human traits such as the urge to know and his capacity for reflective thinking, his love of beauty and goodness, his creativity and idealism, as also his cruelty and selfishness, are all traceable to his biological heritage and his physical and cultural environment. They do not need deviation from any transcendental, divine or supernatural source.
2. Quest for freedom has been a basic urge of human progress. It is the continuation, on the level of intelligence and emotion, of the biological struggle for existence, and is responsible for the emergence of the individual out of the tribe. The search for truth is a part thereof, for knowledge enables man to gain progressive mastery over his environment and create conditions in which freedom can flourish.
3. Freedom is the progressive disappearance of restrictions - physical, social and cultural - on the unfolding of the potentialities of individuals as human beings instead of as cogs in the wheels of a mechanized social system. The supreme purpose of all human endeavour is therefore the attainment of freedom in an ever-increasing measure.
4. Determinism does not exclude freedom. On the contrary, the human will is among the most powerful determining factors of history. The scientific concept of determinism in human affairs takes account of the interaction of man and his environment and recognizes the growing role of the human will supported by reason in the transformation of himself and of his environment. Such determinism is essentially different from the technological or religious doctrine of predestination.
5. The economic interpretation of history is deduced from a wrong interpretation of nineteenth century materialism, which itself is an outmoded doctrine now. History is a determined process, but there are more than one causative factor involved in it. Human will is one of them and cannot always be referred to any material incentive.
6. Ideation is a physiological process resulting from the awareness of the environment. But once they are formed, ideas have an autonomous existence governed by its own laws. The dynamics of ideas runs parallel to the process of social evolution, the two influencing each other in their own ways. But at no particular point of the process of the integral human evolution can a direct casual relation be established between historical events and the movement of ideas. Cultural patterns and ethical values are not mere ideological superstructures of established economic relations. They, too, are historically determined, but by the logic of the history of ideas.
7. Man is the measure of society and the development of the individual is the measure of social progress. Freedom and well-being, if they are actual, are enjoyed by individuals, and it is wrong to ascribe a collective ego to any form of human group. Science rules it out and ethics does not warrant it as that would mean sacrifice of the individual to an abstract collectivity. Humanism therefore advocates a reconstruction of the world as a co-operative commonwealth of free men united in the pursuit of common goals.

8. For creating a new world of freedom, revolution must go beyond an economic reorganization of society. Freedom does not necessarily follow from the capture of political power in the name of the oppressed and exploited classes and the abolition of private property in the means of production.
1. These theses appear in M.N. Roy, *New Humanism*, Renaissance Publishers, Calcutta 1948, pp. 51-59.
2. M.N. Roy, *Reason, Romanticism and Revolution* (2 vols.), Renaissance Publishers, Calcutta 1958, 1955.
3. Roy's published works include nearly fifty books and eighty tracts in Spanish, German, Russian, French and English. There are about two thousand pages of unpublished writing in the M.N. Roy archives.
4. Cf. *New Humanism and Reason, Romanticism and Revolution*, vol. II, Ch. 12.
5. Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry Into Meaning and Truth*, George Allen & Unwin, London 1940, pp. 245-46.

Published in **The Radical Humanist**, July 2006.

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## **A.B. Shah (1920-81)**

**N. Innaiah**

Amritlal Bhikkubai Shah was a rare intellectual who founded the Indian Secular Society. He was an outstanding critic of communism, communalism and obscurantism in India. Shah stood for human values and freedom. He applied scientific method to every field and came to rational conclusions on critical matters.

Perhaps A.B. Shah was the first critic of M.N. Roy's Radical Democratic principles, later called "22 Thesis". He never accepted any theory or principle without scrutiny.

A.B. Shah hailed from a Digambar Jain family of a small town of Gujarat. He was born in 1920. Until 17 years Shah followed the Digambar Jain way of life. Shah came to Pune in 1937 and took his B.Sc. degree from Ferguson College in 1941. A.B. Shah taught mathematics in S.P. College, Pune and played an active role in the teachers' union. Introduced to M.N. Roy during 1946, he attended the study camps conducted by Roy in Dehra Dun and other places. It was in those study camps that Shah for the first time met Prof. Sib Narayan Ray. From then on, they remained life-long friends.

While in Pune, A.B. Shah came close to several intellectuals like Tarkatheertha Laxman Sastri Joshi, M.P. Rege, V.M. Dandekar, V.M. Tarkunde and others.

### ***Thought and Criticism of A.B. Shah :***

A.B. Shah considered himself a Royist with a difference. Perhaps he agreed with only the broad principles of Roy. As soon as M.N. Roy formulated the "22 Thesis", A.B. Shah criticised it and published his views in Roy's own journal, Independent India (later Radical Humanist).

M.N. Roy encouraged criticism and asked Shah to contribute more articles. From then onwards Professor Sib Narayan Ray and A.B. Shah developed intimate friendship. A.B. Shah says that Roy is unique in recognizing the need for a philosophical and cultural revolution accompanying a political and economic revolution. Roy advocated politics without parties whereas Shah opined that parties in some guise are a must to mediate between the citizen and the State. Shah also doubted the co-operative economy of Roy.

A.B. Shah says that Roy's ideas are valid at least in three spheres. The major one is to approach human problems with a rational outlook. Even emotions can be tempered with reason. Scientific method can be applied to every situation. Shah says that there is no leader who can be compared with Roy in India in this field.

Roy advocated decentralization of administration. Concentration of power even at village level should be opposed and participation of citizens encouraged. Shah says that Roy's

decentralization of power leads to equality where genuine freedom of the individual is possible. Royists did not like the criticism of Shah and his alternative thesis.

Shah suggested certain amendments to Roy's philosophical principles also synchronizing with the latest scientific developments. For example, Shah suggested that man is capable of being rational instead of being "essentially rational".

### ***Challenge to Puri Sankaracharya:***

A.B. Shah published his views on cow slaughter and beef eating in ancient India and supported his views with scriptural authority. These articles appeared in Marathi magazine Lok Satta. Puri Sankaracharya offered to withdraw his agitation for a ban on cow slaughter if Shah could prove his point. Shah accepted the challenge and arranged a meeting with Tarkatheertha Laxman Sastri Joshi to show scriptural evidence. Ultimately, Puri Sankaracharya backed out with some lame excuses.

### ***Tradition and Modernity:***

Shah published his views on Modernity and Tradition in a book, which led to many controversies. He differentiated modernity from modernization. He also wanted to separate the outdated, useless ancient traditions and adopt modern human values and ethics. Applying technology to several aspects of life comes under modernization whereas accepting and implementing human values, ethics and freedom comes under modernity.

### ***RSS:***

Shah wrote without mincing words that Vivekananda is the real inspiring spirit for RSS. It is a real threat to all liberal Indians (Secularist 1979 Nov-Dec).

### ***Critique of Muslim Obscurantism:***

A.B. Shah, with the support and help of Hamid Dalwai, led a crusade against orthodox, fanatic Muslims and tried to liberate Muslim women. The elite Muslims played a dubious role while lower class Muslims and their womenfolk liked Shah's approach. Shah appealed for a bold approach to face the crisis in Islam. Shah traced the absence of modern trends, values and ethics in Islam. He also pointed out the failure of the Ram-Rahim approach of Gandhi and the critical assessment of M.N. Roy. Shah showed how Islam is anti humanistic in all walks of life. He pleaded for uniform civil code without any religious bias. He organized a society called Satya Shodak Mandal to educate Muslims and Hindus. Shah also worked with Samaj Prabhodan Samstha.

### ***Work with Dalits and Children of Prostitutes:***

Shah worked for the uplift of the disadvantaged. He wrote the history of the Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra. He wanted the educated Dalits to come forward to work in all fields. Shah strongly felt that lower class Dalits are not inferior to any one but their social and cultural conditions put impediments in their progress. Shah wanted to remove those obstacles. Shah also worked on another project to help the children of prostitutes in Maharashtra. He evolved a project called Renuka Devi Association to educate the children of prostitutes. The results can be seen in Bookamb village near Pune. He organized agricultural societies for Dalits.

### ***Good Speaker and Writer:***

A.B. Shah toured India extensively, organized the Indian Secular Society and conducted seminars, symposia and public discussions on the issue of separation of State and religion. Similarly, Shah actively participated in numerous projects on education including the Kothari Commission. A.B. Shah was a good speaker and a writer in English. Shah edited and published several books. Seminar proceedings were published as books. The books included Gandhi, Nehru, Gokhale, Roy, Communism, Humanism, Secularism, Obscenity, Modernity, Challenges to Secularism, Tradition, What Ails Muslims, Scientific Method etc. He also contributed many articles to standard journals. Shah was precise in his exposition and very scientific in approach to problems.

### ***Organiser and Publisher:***

From 1964 onwards Shah aggressively worked in several fields including education, secularism, humanism and modernity. Shah tried to rally all the Muslim organizations and Hindu fundamentalists to discuss and thrash out some agreeable formula for secularism. But he found that it was not possible and discarded that attempt. Shah started his own publishing house called "Nachiketa Publishers" and brought out many books. Later it was bought by Statesman.

Shah's Scientific Method was published by Allied, Bombay. Shah worked with V.V. John, J.P. Naik and conducted many discussions on education. A.B. Shah came close to Edward Shills, the famous sociologist of Chicago University. Under his impact, Shah started a quarterly journal "The Humanist Review," but could not continue it due to several constraints. A.B. Shah laid solid foundation for the Indian Secular Society and its bi-monthly journal, which is continued now under the editorship of Prof V.K. Sinha.

Shah was Principal of S.I.E.S. College, Bombay. Prof. Sib Narayan Ray joined the college to teach English literature. A.B. Shah also joined the 'Quest' Editorial board and later started 'New Quest' from Bombay. He soon resigned as Principal to shift to Pune where he worked vigorously for Renaissance and Secularism.

A.B. Shah participated in international seminars in Seoul, and Mexico and presented papers. He opposed the Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. At that time Shah distributed the prison diary of Jayaprakash Narayan and stood by him. A.B.

Shah served as General Secretary of the Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom for a decade during 1960s.

A.B. Shah was always opposed to dictatorship. He was a critical Marxist. He published Victor Fic's two volumes on Indian communism. He died on October 11, 1981 in Pune.

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